



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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PSYOP: On a Complete Change in Organization, Practice, and Doctrine

Alfred Paddock, Jr.

On Monday, June 21, 2010, Admiral Eric T. Olson, commander of the US Special Operations Command, announced a decision to change the term, "psychological operations" (PSYOP) to "Military Information Support" and "Military Information Support Operations" (MISO). He stated that henceforth the term, PSYOP, will be eliminated from usage in the military.

Admiral Olson commands all of the military services' special operations commands. He and General George Casey, Army chief of staff, agreed on the decision, which the Secretary of Defense approved. As Admiral Olson states, "This will be a complete change in organization, practice, and doctrine."

The bulk of our PSYOP forces is in the Army. Its only active duty organization, the 4th PSYOP Group, is located at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Its commander, a colonel, reports to the commander of the US Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), a lieutenant general. In addition, there are two PSYOP groups in the Army Reserve.

Admiral Olson's memo announcing this decision states that the active duty PSYOP community is very receptive to this change. "Very" is the operative word. Based on my discussions with some active duty personnel over the past couple of years, I don't believe this to be the case. Of course, all of them knew that I was writing an article for publication, and asked for non-attribution.

And what about PSYOP reserve component (RC) personnel? Even though they are no longer assigned to USASOC, they represent two thirds of the PSYOP force structure. Admiral Olson's memo does not mention them. I talk to RC PSYOP personnel often, and my sense is that many in their community would not want to see the name changed.

The name, psychological operations, or PSYOP, has been employed since the Vietnam War. Prior to that, during World War II and Korea, "psychological warfare" was used. In other words, the term "psychological" was an integral part of our lexicon for almost 70 years. Most people understand that psychological operations or psychological warfare are intended to influence an audience in ways that support our objectives. This does not require much elaboration.

Changing the name to Military Information Support Operations (MISO), however, not only detracts from PSYOP lineage, it is impractical. The term, "information," is so diffuse as used

Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 2010	2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2010 to 00-00-2010		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE PSYOP: On a Complete Change in Organization Practice, and Doctrine			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S)			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Alfred Paddock, Fort Bragg, NC			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 3	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

throughout the US government that differentiating a MISO's mission would be difficult. But perhaps that's the purpose--camouflage. Some see the term, PSYOP, as too politically sensitive.

Not long ago I received an email from a friend in the UK, Professor Philip M. Taylor, one of the foremost authorities on propaganda history. He told me of an incident that took place several years ago that proved to be embarrassing to their 15 UK POG (Psychological Operations Group). Under political pressure, they changed their name to the 15 Information Support Group [sound familiar?]

After making the changes necessary to implement this action, one day a journalist asked some questions of a 15 Information Group member in which it became clear that the 15th actually still conducted PSYOP, no matter what the change in name. As Phil Taylor states, the journalist asked if the 15th was trying to hide something, and "down went the credibility." So the 15th changed its name back to 15 UK POG, as Phil states, "at enormous cost." What will a MISO soldier reply when a seasoned journalist asks if what his unit really does is PSYOP? How does one truthfully answer that question?

The decision has been made. But it is a sad and potentially embarrassing development for PSYOP.

Alfred Paddock, Jr., was on active duty in the U.S. Army, 1957–1988, and served three combat tours in Laos and Vietnam with Special Forces. He also was the Director for Psychological Operations, Office of the Secretary of Defense. In June 2009 he received the inaugural Gold Award of the MG Robert A. McClure Medal for Exemplary Service in Psychological Operations, recognizing his lifetime of achievements and outstanding service to the Psychological Operations Regiment.

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